



# I can be completely honest only in song.

**I. Marchelian & M. Zibawi** When it pleases her to talk – which is not often – Fairuz goes straight to the heart of things. Her words, like her songs, speak directly to you. Her innermost self engages yours. A river of honesty flows between you the moment she starts to speak. She, who accustomed us to silence, saying she could be completely honest only in song, unfolds before us as one does before oneself in a mirror, revealing a face that no one else can see.

Nuhad Haddad (Fairuz) was born in 1935. Her parents were Wadi' Haddad and Lisa Bustani. She shared her humble beginnings in Zuqaq al-Balat with her three siblings, Joseph, Amal, and Huda.

**Fairuz** I had a happy childhood, even though there were few reasons to be happy. It was difficult but happy. Our house consisted of a single room and a kitchen we shared with the neighbours. To this day, I remember my father covering the light bulb with newspapers so he could read while we were sleeping. I was braver than my brother. I was a little devil. I've quieted down tremendously. I was a little devil, and happy; that's what I remember. I was well-behaved in class, but not in the

playground. I didn't know my times tables... I still don't. I made a passing grade in math only once, by a stroke of luck. I hate numbers; I can't deal with them.

I didn't get what I wanted. I used to do the housework. I was the oldest girl, and I grew up quickly. But childhood is always beautiful. Childhood is what makes us see beauty in the world, in spite of everything. It frees us from our sorrows.

**IM & MZ** As a child she sang the popular songs of her day. She sang in school, and then, at the age of fourteen, she found herself "going professional".

**F** I used to sing in school. One day Muhammad Flayfil listened to me, and when I was done he asked me if I wanted to be a singer. I said yes, and under his supervision, I entered the conservatoire. I was there less than a year. I sang with the chorale at the broadcasting service, but I also had the solos in some patriotic songs Flayfil composed, like *Maysalun*. After that, I met Halim al-Rumi, also at the broadcasting service. I remember I was wearing my black uniform the day he called for me and asked to hear me sing. I sang Asmahan's *Ya Dirati* and Farid al-Atrash's *Ya Zahratan fi Khayali*: a *mawwal* and a tango. I became an employee of the broadcasting services, and sang pieces by Halim al-Rumi, Nicolas al-Manni and Tawfiq al-Basha. At the broadcasting service I met 'Asi too, and our journey of a thousand miles began. We were completely dedicated to the work. From Beirut to Damascus and back to Beirut. From studio to studio. From Radio Near East to Radio Damascus. From the studio I went on the stage, and Damascus was the first stop. I had to sing a difficult poem in classical Arabic by 'Umar Abu Risha. I was terrified of forgetting the words, so I put the text on the microphone in front of me. I sang in something like a trance, and woke up to the audience's applause. I can still see myself going on-stage in my boots and skirt. I remember the sketch about Hayfa and the goat. When they brought the goat on-stage I was terrified, as if it were a wild animal.

**IM & MZ** From songs to sketches to musical theatre, her output was prolific. She sang the *mawwal*, the *muwashshah*, the classical poem. She sang tangos, rhumbas and *dabkes*; she sang

the *baghdadi* and the *badawi*. Her relationship with 'Asi and Mansur solidified; they became inseparable.

**F** We worked day and night; there was no stopping for rest. Whenever I hear one of my *muwashshah* I remember Damascus, and the warmth and enthusiasm of the audience at the International Exposition. The program would be over, and they would refuse to let it end. I remember going back on-stage after I had taken off my makeup and put on my street clothes. I went back on to sing *Ya Mal al-Sham*. When the concert was over I went out the back door, the crowd was actually lifting up the car! I remember the first time we went to Beirut to present *Hala and the King* in Piccadilly Square. There was a power outage, and this was before generators. People were getting restless waiting, so I went out and sang by candlelight, without a microphone, in the dark...

My relationship with the Rahbani brothers joined my work to theirs and made us one voice. Their language became my own, as if it were coming from me. My love for my songs makes me feel they're part of me. Everything I have sung is part of my life, something very dear to me. Every song brings back a certain moment from the past. The sorrow, if there was any, passes with time, and all that's left is the beauty. The roles I've played on-stage are also part of me. There's no one role I favour over the others. I feel I haven't really acted out roles in the traditional sense. 'Asi used to write parts for me that resembled me. Every role I've played reflects an aspect of myself.

Then there is everyday life and its problems. The results of my marriage to 'Asi were twofold, as they usually are in marriages of that type. On the artistic level, the result is great works of art, but on the family level, the couple goes through what any other couple goes through. Getting along is difficult enough for ordinary people, so imagine how it was for us. We had a difficult home. Our children went through a lot. They are children of suffering. Our family is like a Greek tragedy: pain and sorrow are its basis; the happiness is only temporary. Happiness was the dream, in our family, and sorrow the reality.

My story with the Rahbani family is a long one. It's been talked about a lot, but the truth has never been told. Our

differences go way back, to the very beginning. When they chose to criticise me and wage war against me, I chose silence. I didn't leave my home; I was made to leave. They kept me away from my work, although I was willing to cooperate. There may come a day when I tell all, but for now I prefer silence. I've always been a friend of silence. In Egypt they asked me how I'd feel about singing in front of the Sphinx, and I said : "the Sphinx and I are old friends." I love him for his silence, I like solitude. That's part of my nature and you don't choose your nature; it chooses you.

**IM & MZ** She loves silence, and her silent face is familiar to all. But those nearest to her are also familiar with her wit and intuition, and her amazing knack for getting at the heart of things. "I'm very shy," she says. Friends forget her shyness because "with them the door has been opened."

**F** I laugh, but that doesn't mean that I'm not shy. Laughter is a different thing altogether. I likes jokes and those who laugh. I'm in the second category. My shyness is a part of me; I can't change it or run away from it. It's something born with you, not something you acquire. A little shyness is good, like a hint of spice. As I said before, I'm a partisan of silence. Real communication is something that flows from one heart to another. The language of feelings is the one I trust.

Words can't define reality. I access reality through feeling. Words can be beautiful, but they can also be incomplete, or complete but not beautiful. Words are weak. Their beauty can be enchanting, but even the most beautiful words aren't always accompanied by a friendly face. Words, formal visits, flattery: I've always done without those things. There are very few honest words: you can count them on the fingers of one hand. Friends come and go like waves on the shore. Is there really such a thing as a friend? I can be completely honest only in song.

**IM & MZ** Although Fairuz remained in Lebanon throughout the war, she made no social or artistic appearances there. She abandoned the Lebanese stage for seventeen years, performing only in Arab and foreign capitals. Her songs celebrated her people and her country, and today she remains in Beirut to witness its emergence from war into peace. She refused to leave as so many others left, and she refused to participate in

any festival organised by the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism.

**F** I lived through the war, and in times of war there's no difference between the artist and the person on the street. War doesn't distinguish between them. War is destruction of human beings and of everything they've built. War is ugly. Nothing can compare to the terror that's a commonplace of war. I can only hope the dark days we went through never occur again. I experienced the war, just like everyone else, but I never thought of leaving Lebanon. The idea never crossed my mind. I don't want to analyse my reasons for staying. I believe in my gut feelings. All I know is, I'm here to stay. I've been through the fear just like everyone else and I've hidden from the shelling just like everyone else, knowing that the shelters offer more of a psychological comfort than any real protection. It's a uniquely Lebanese frame of mind, something no one else can understand. We're optimistic. Other times we give in to depression.

The war brought an end to a whole era. It was an era of freedom, of tranquillity, of strong human relationships. The Lebanese state of mind is hard to explain. The war put an end to happiness. The wave of parties and singing and celebrations we're seeing now has nothing to do with happiness. We were living a dream, and it's over. What's done is done. Reminiscing about the past won't bring it back. The circumstances I lived through kept me from performing in Lebanon, and I worry about making a comeback after such a long absence. I look forward to it, but at the same time I'm afraid of it.

There's fear in real life, and then there's stage fright. I have both. Fear in real life is exhausting. In real life, I'm afraid of loneliness, ugliness, hate, envy, malice. As for the stage fright, it's always there. The more successful an artist is, the more afraid he or she is. I'm afraid for my art. A responsible person becomes very cautious in the face of fear. Fear produces responsibility. The moment someone cares about me or takes an interest in me, my responsibilities increase, and so does my fear. Maybe the essence of stage fright is an artist's desire to give everything he or she has to the audience. Every appearance I've made on-stage has been a gamble that involved my entire being.

Returning to the Lebanese stage after so long will be a challenge. I say Lebanon, but I mean Beirut, because I've made up my mind that my first appearance will be in the capital. Everything's changed, but that doesn't scare me. I used to sing about Lebanon, and the songs about it...

Today, I feel a huge barrier separating me from songs like *Bahibbak Ya Lubnan*. There's a certain language that died and has been buried. We in Lebanon must come up with a new language, which is no easy task. Perhaps we are really in need of silence. Silence is difficult but necessary. There are people who are in need of silence and don't realise it. Maybe we should go back to the time of Charlie Chaplin. There's too much noise, too much talk. When I see and hear what's going around me in my country today, I feel we should use the language of Marcel Marceau. Sign language would be better than all this noise.

We sang a dream. Everything I sang was an invitation to dream. I lived in a time of beauty and art. I say to myself, I wish I could live only for my art. I wish I had never known reality and its ugliness. I wished I had stayed the way I was, far from reality, having nothing to do with anything but my art.

*Beirut, 1992*